

**Strategic Alliance, Contrasting Agendas: The Respective
Motivations of the U.S. and Great Britain for the 1953
Anglo-American Removal of Mohammad Mossadegh**

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Although the U.S. and Great Britain worked together to overthrow Mohammed Mossadegh as the leader of Iran, their respective motives contrasted with each other. On one side was Britain's economic motivation with their desire to hold onto their oil investments in Iran and on the other was the U.S.'s political motivation, set on imposing a bulwark against the rising power and influence of the Soviet Union.

The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was founded in 1909 by British businessman and oil tycoon, William Knox D'Arcy. Following the British government's purchase of 51% of the company, Britain effectively took full control of the company sparking discontent and disagreement with Iran in the decades to come. Another growing piece of the narrative was the rising power of the Soviet Union. Under Stalin, the Soviet Union undertook rapid industrialization measures and boasted a formidable military through World War II. At the end of the war in 1945, the Soviets acquired several new territories, effectively annexing Eastern Europe and denying them sovereignty. The Soviet Union became a true global superpower, rivaled only by the United States. NATO was formed in 1949 by the United States, Canada, and several Western European nations to provide an alliance and collective security against the rising power of the Soviet Union. The first factor that began rising oil tensions between Iran and Britain was the stark discrepancy in each country's respective profits. While there were several negotiation attempts, Great Britain always received a disproportionately higher amount of money. Iran's mistreatment was further exemplified when ARAMCO(a Saudi Arabian oil company) and U.S. oil companies negotiated a 50/50 split of revenue in 1950. This was at the

same time when the AIOC was paying more in British taxes than it was in royalties to Iran.¹ This exemplifies just how much Iran was being taken advantage of and leads to Mohammad Mossadegh, a key patriotic figure in Iranian politics being elected as prime minister in 1951.

Great Britain's decision to overthrow Mossadegh in 1953 was shown to be primarily motivated by economic interests rather than concerns about national sovereignty or communism. Britain demonstrated their focus on protecting their economic interests with a quick retaliation to nationalization to regain their revenue. Britain understood that Mossadegh's patriotism would prevent them from reaching a settlement post-nationalization. So Britain weakened Iran economically making them more susceptible to an invasion, allowing Britain to regain their lost part in Iran's oil revenue. Mossadegh was a polarizing figure, amassing both significant support and opposition from the people. He was an outspoken advocate of nationalism and severely opposed Britain's control of Iran's oil. In a long-fought political battle, Mossadegh completed his mission and became the father of the bill that nationalized Iran's oil in 1951. "As soon as the standing vote was taken, Dr. Mossadegh rose and with his arms outstretched said: 'Praise God. Iran has regained her rights.'"² Mossadegh believed that by nationalizing Iran's oil industry, the Iranian government could regain control over its own natural resources. Moreover, by controlling the oil industry, Iran could direct its resources toward its own economic growth and reduce its dependence on foreign powers. For Mossadegh, Britain's control of Iran's oil was not just a revenue issue but also a matter of Iran's national sovereignty and pride. While nationalization was a prodigious win for Iran, it was a devastating loss for Britain. Following Mossadegh's

¹ Mostafa T. Zahrani, "The Coup That Changed the Middle East," *JSTOR*, [Page #94], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40209809?searchText=>.

² Micheal Clark, "Iran Senate Votes Oil Nationalizing," *The New York Times* (New York), May 1, 1951], *The New York Times*.

nationalization of oil, Britain needed a quick comeback following their economic losses due to nationalization. They placed embargoes on Iran's oil with the intent to hurt them economically since Iran's oil income was a very important source of revenue for the state. Without income from oil, Iran had a much less stable economy leading to civil unrest and possible bankruptcy.³ An interview with British spy Norman Darbyshire, a key contributor to planning the 1953 coup revealed how Britain was really thinking. The interview took place in 1983, long after the coup for British T.V. series "End of Empire" which had an episode about the British-run oil industry in Iran and the subsequent Anglo-American coup.

Reporter: Was the embargo on oil sales that was going on important in rallying the opposition?
 Darbyshire: As the economic situation worsened; the better it was for us--it was easier for us because people began to realize that promises were empty.

Reporter: If a settlement had meant starting up the oil industry again, it would not have necessarily been what you wanted

Darbyshire: No, I think we were better off getting rid of him.⁴

This interview exhibits that following nationalization, the embargos Britain placed were meant to pressure Iran economically. However, Britain was never looking to reach any settlement. Rather, the embargos made Iran more susceptible to foreign invasion(Both the West and the Soviets). Britain understood that Mossadegh, a devout patriot, would never give up nationalization to reach a settlement. So Britain's best option was to overthrow the ringleader, then go back to controlling Iran's oil, making Britain and the U.S. puppeteers behind the curtains.

³ Memorandum, "Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence, Directorate of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency," July 11, 1951, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951-54Iran/d39>.

⁴ Norman Darbyshire, interview, National Security Archive, last modified 1985, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/7033888/National-Security-Archive.pdf>.

While Mossadegh's efforts to nationalize oil further threatened Britain's weak postwar economy, Soviet containment was the dominant cause of the U.S. to enter a partnership with Britain to oust Mossadegh. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, while the U.S.-USSR rivalry was forming, Washington was without their right-hand man. World War II resulted in a severe deterioration of Britain's economy. The war forced Britain to deplete its national reserves and borrow heavily from other countries, leaving the nation in debt and financially drained. The U.S. needed Britain to be strong economically in order to maintain the West's powerful sphere of influence while limiting the East's. And what certainly didn't help Britain's economy was Mossadegh's oil nationalization in 1951. "After all, the AIOC's Iranian operation was Britain's single largest overseas asset and of vital importance to its balance of payments...Mosadeq's nationalization of the AIOC's Iranian assets and Britain's consequent imposition of an oil embargo threatened to jeopardize western rearmament and economic reconstruction because these depended upon adequate and reliable sources of oil."⁵ Without oil revenue from Iran, Britain's weak postwar economy became even weaker. And even though Iran was also suffering from the embargos, Britain got hit much harder. While Britain was struggling, the U.S. was in the midst of a high-stake proxy war with the Soviet Union during the Korean War. At this time, the global superpowers were in an escalating nuclear arms race. To prevent any more economic bleeding, Monty Woodhouse, a British politician and key player in organizing British aspects of the 1953 met at CIA headquarters with director of covert operations Frank Wisner, and Kermit Roosevelt looking for support to oust Mossadegh. As Woodhouse put it to the Americans, "Even if a settlement of the oil dispute could be negotiated with Mossadeq, which is doubtful, he was still incapable of resisting a coup by the Tudeh [Communist] Party, if it were backed by Soviet

⁵ Steve Marsh, "The United States, Iran and Operation 'Ajax': Inverting Interpretative Orthodoxy," *JSTOR*, [Page #4], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284305>.

support. Therefore he must be removed." ⁶ In this meeting, Woodhouse tried to frame his reasoning for why the U.S. should help oust Mossadegh in a way that involved the U.S. 's affairs and lined up with their goals of providing security to their allies by limiting the spread of sovietism. As more tension between the U.S. and the Soviets rose, the more the U.S. stressed the limitation of Soviet influence. So while Britain was thinking about the loss of their greatest foreign economic asset, the U.S. was focused on their brewing political rivalry with the Soviet Union.⁷ In the end, teaming up proved to be a win-win for the West for their respective reasons.

The U.S.'s political motivations for the 1953 coup began with the brewing rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The rising USSR was looking to expand their communist influence, trying to expand into Europe and the Middle East and form alliances against the United States. To deter this, the U.S. formed NATO in 1949, creating alliances with several European powers. They were the main country responsible for deterring Soviet expansionism as they were their clear-cut rival superpower during the Cold War from 1947 to the late 20th century.

Under the new leadership of President Eisenhower, The U.S. was more focused on implementing an offensive plan to deter Soviet expansionism. The 1953 coup made for very interesting timing in Washington. Early 1953 was Truman's final moment of his two-term service as President until Dwight Eisenhower was put into office. Truman left office as one of the most

⁶ Mostafa T. Zahrani, "The Coup That Changed the Middle East," *JSTOR*, [Page #95], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40209809?searchText=>.

⁷ Hamid Madadi, "UNITED STATES INVOLVEMENT IN MIDDLE EAST POLITICS," *JSTOR*, [Page #4], https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41393034.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A892bd652fe119ec435fecfaa64a2974a&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

unpopular leaders of our country partly due to his defensive foreign affairs policy. He provided economic assistance to Europe with the Marshall Plan and vowed to provide support for democracies against authoritarian threats with the Truman Doctrine. While promising to contain the spread of the Soviets, Truman never initiated an offensive scheme to prevent such. So when Eisenhower came into office, he adopted a whole foreign policy scheme. However, despite a shift in foreign policy, it's important to understand that neither President wanted to see communist expansion. "The Truman and Eisenhower administrations both viewed Iran and the oil crisis predominantly as a Cold War issue, an approach helped by the fact that there were precious few vested US economic interests to consider in Iran. As George McGhee, US Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, noted: 'were it not for the Cold War, there is no reason why we shouldn't let the British and the Iranians fight it out.'"⁸ Furthermore, the timing of the initial U.S. approval of the plan to overthrow Mossadegh two weeks after Eisenhower's inauguration suggests that the initiative was due to Eisenhower's activist foreign policy views rather than for economic opportunity. The coup acted as a test of the Eisenhower administration's new strategy for combating Soviet expansionism.⁹ The Eisenhower administration's "activist foreign policy views" imply a strategic, offensive, shift in how the U.S. handled their foreign affairs. The quote also negates the idea of the U.S. being a part of the coup for the mere pursuit of economic gain. Post WW2 and under Truman, the U.S. was solid economically so right after Eisenhower was put into office, there was no reason for an economically motivated coup. Moreover, with Eisenhower in charge of the United States, there

⁸ Steve Marsh, "The United States, Iran and Operation 'Ajax': Inverting Interpretative Orthodoxy," *JSTOR*, [Page #5], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284305>.

⁹ Mostafa T. Zahrani, "The Coup That Changed the Middle East," *JSTOR*, [Page #96], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40209809?searchText=> .

seemed to be a greater importance of keeping a watchful eye on the Soviet Union and implementing a more offensive plan to limit their spreading. Eisenhower had a more cooperative relationship with the CIA, constantly in communication regarding the USSR's affairs. Moreover, Eisenhower had close ties with the appointed CIA director Allen Dulles with his brother John Foster Dulles being Eisenhower's Secretary of State and most trusted advisor. A memorandum from Allen Dulles to Eisenhower displays the watchful eye that Eisenhower wanted to keep on the Soviet Union. "Ever since the assassination of General Razmara in March 1951, Premier Ali Razmara and the subsequent impasse and diplomatic break with Britain over the oil negotiations, the Iranian situation has been slowly disintegrating. The result has been a steady decrease in the power and influence of the Western democracies and the building up of a situation where a Communist takeover is becoming more and more of a possibility...Today's situation in Teheran remains tense and unresolved."¹⁰ As tensions brewed, Dulles wanted it to be clear and apparent that a Soviet takeover was becoming more and more likely, meaning that the U.S. had to eventually step in. The quoted CIA document below displays an even greater focus that the CIA had on the USSR's attempts at expansionism and forming a relationship with Iran. "Moscow's current attempts to improve relations with peripheral countries is increasingly apparent in the USSR's tactics towards Iran, where political deterioration increases the Kremlin's opportunities to gain greater influence. The USSR appears to be trying to undermine Mosadeq's attempt to remain neutral in the East-West struggle. In the long run, the Russians hope to orient Iran to the USSR...Moscow may already have broached a proposed settlement for some of these differences during recent meetings with Mossadeq."¹¹ Throughout the early 1950s leading up to the coup, it

¹⁰ Allen Dulles to Dwight Eisenhower, March 1, 1953, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951-54Iran/d169>.

¹¹ CIA, MOSCOWS CHANGING ATTITUDE TOWARD IRAN, Misc. Doc. (July 1, 1953). <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00890A000100060004-6.pdf>.

was very difficult to get read on what Mossadegh's intentions were and who he was looking to form alliances with, if any at all." Musaddiq, had steadfastly kept the Tudeh Party at arm's length, repeatedly refusing to enter into any popular front alliance with them."¹² So while Soviet intervention into Iran was never certain, The U.S.; superpower of NATO wanted to err on the side of caution, keeping close tabs on them and eventually making the decision to overthrow Iran. In a calculated decision, the U.S. decided that they must take the offensive and get to Iran before the Soviets did.

In terms of geopolitical purposes, Iran's location in the Middle East served as another key point in the U.S.'s motivation for overthrowing Mossadegh. The Middle East was and still is a paramount area in terms of global power dynamics and countries' spheres of influence. The Middle East acted as a proxy arena of competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Post WW2, The Soviets sought a stronger presence in the Middle East to offset the West's large sphere of influence throughout it in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and several other Arab states.¹³ The Soviets worked hard to develop close ties with Egypt, Syria and of course, Iran. As a key territory in the Middle East, Iran became a significant pawn in the Cold War chessboard. Iran's geographical advantage not only bolstered their value as a potential player in Soviet expansion but also forced the U.S. to solidify their influence in the region.¹⁴ Encapsulated in a 1950 National Security Council Paper titled NSC-68 that focused on Soviet containment during the Cold War, Iran was propelled upwards in America's list of important countries to keep

¹² *History in Dispute Volume 15* (n.p.: St. James Press, 2004), [Page #157].

¹³ Paul Salem, "The Middle East: Evolution of a Broken Regional Order," in *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, [Page #4], excerpt from *Carnegie Papers*, accessed May 5, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec9_salem_broken_order_final.pdf.

¹⁴ Erica Shoenberger and Stephanie Reich, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East," *JSTOR*, [Page #9], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3011049>.

an eye on due to concern about its new-found vulnerability to communist subversion. Iran's oil, close proximity to the Soviet Union, and geo-strategic location in the Middle East made it a Western asset but more importantly, a territory that couldn't be lost to the USSR.¹⁵ The United States aimed to prevent Iran from falling under Soviet influence but also sought to ensure that they maintained a powerful Western sphere of influence in the region. This win-win balancing act for the U.S. made overthrowing Mossadegh a decisive and calculated choice.

In conclusion, the United States and Great Britain exhibited differing motives for overthrowing Mossadegh in 1953 revealing Britain's economic interests and the U.S.'s political strategy. The coup ultimately shaped the course of events in Iran through the 20th and 21st centuries and has molded these countries' global relations, from the 1979 Iranian revolution and hostage crisis to today's Iran-funded militias in the Israel-Hamas War to undermine the U.S. and its allies. The events that occurred on August 19, 1953, will continue to serve as one of the most pivotal "what-ifs" in history with far-reaching implications that will continue to reverberate through the rest of our lives.

¹⁵ Steve Marsh, "The United States, Iran and Operation 'Ajax': Inverting Interpretative Orthodoxy," *JSTOR*, [Page #3], <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4284305>.

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